

Sunday, June 2, 2019
Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year C)
John 17.20-26
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Today's Gospel is the final few verses of what is referred to as Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer." It is an extended prayer that Jesus prays on what we now know as Maundy Thursday, right before he goes to the Garden of Gethsemane. In the part that we heard to today, Jesus prays, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one" (Jn 17.20-21a). And he goes on to reiterate the most important aspect of his prayer: "that they may be one, as we are one" (v 22). Not just one, but "that they may become completely one" (v 23). What Jesus is talking about here is unity. That the disciples and those who follow after them—that would be us—are in unity. Yeah, good luck with that.

Depending on the parameters used, it is estimated that there are tens of thousands of Christian denominations in the world today. One source I found claims that there may be as many as 50,000 Christian denominations. And that doesn't even count the independent, non-denominational churches out there. So how did we get from one "holy catholic (i.e. universal) and apostolic church" to tens of thousands of denominations? Certainly, there are historical and cultural reasons that have resulted in the increased divisions within churches leading to schisms and new churches and denominations. But the real question becomes: was all of this division really necessary? And more importantly, doesn't this exponential dividing of the church go against what Jesus prays in today's Gospel? Does it fly in the face of our Lord's desire, even his injunction to us, to seek to be in unity?

And for that matter, what does being in unity even mean? Does it mean that we all have to think the same way, act the same way, feel the same way? Does it mean that we all have to agree? Of course not! That would be impossible. That would be ridiculous. At least, not if we are to retain any semblance of individuality, any possibility of free will. I don't know about you, but I certainly wouldn't want a world filled with people just like me. That would probably create more problems that it would solve.

No, that's not what Jesus is getting at. When he prays for unity, Jesus prays that we all be one as he and the Father are one. That we are to be in relationship, in communion with one another, just as Jesus and the Father are in communion. A communion based on mutual love. As Christians, we find the foundation of our communion with one another in the ultimate example of that communion—in our own relationship with God and Christ. We find the foundation of our communion with one another in a unity of purpose that flows from our relationship with God and Christ. That our communion is based on and rooted in living in accordance with the Great Commandments: to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Or put even more simply, as Jesus has just told his disciples a few minutes before, to love one another as he has loved us. What that looks like is as individual as we are. Just as in any relationship, ours with God, or ours with one another, there are differences in perspective, in approach, in how that love is lived out. The important thing is that it is lived out in a faithful and authentic way.

Admittedly, It's hard to explain rationally what Jesus was getting at. So, perhaps an illustration will help.

Back in the early to mid-90s the Episcopal Church was attempting to find a constructive way of dealing with increased tension and even division over issues of sexuality. Not just sexual orientation and gender identity, but also issues surrounding marriage and divorce, sexual intimacy outside of marriage, pregnancy outside of marriage, abortion, and other related topics. The idea was to have a series of discussions on these topics, providing a safe space so people could freely express their perspectives, to hopefully learn from one another, and then to provide participants with the opportunity to give feedback to the National Church. The parish I was a member of decided to go through the process and the rector tapped me and another woman to run the discussions. Like many parishes, the parishioners at St. Francis had a broad range of perspectives on the various topics. Generally, we had good and productive discussions. But there were a few people that had their own agendas. A small group who were very upset that the Episcopal Church was allowing gays and lesbians to become priests. Keep in mind this was a decade before the election of Gene Robinson as the first openly gay, partnered bishop. An event that eventually led to many people leaving the church and four congregations breaking away from the Diocese of Los Angeles, including All Saints, here in Long Beach.

Of course, now a decade and a half after Gene Robinson, we have pretty much dealt with the issue and have moved on. But 25 years ago, things were just starting to come to a head and tensions were running high in some quarters. Well, there was one parishioner at St. Francis who was very upset over the gay issue and was incredibly verbal about it. She only attended the discussions so she could express her views, not to learn from one another. She only attended so she could have the opportunity to tell the Diocese and the National Church that they were wrong and get them to go back to the good old days when there were no gays in the church.

During the course of the discussions, it became obvious that Mary and I were on complete opposite ends of the spectrum. So I became the focus of her attentions. After the discussion groups ended, she took every opportunity she could to try to convince me that I was wrong and I needed to support her in changing the Episcopal Church. After a while, it got really old. I did not agree with her at all and there was no way she could ever get me to change my position. One Sunday after church, Mary cornered me in the parking lot and started in on me for the umpteenth time.

As soon as she started in, I said, "Mary, stop. Just stop. You know where I stand and I know where you stand on this issue. I'm not going to change your mind and you're not going to change my mind. And frankly, for me, this is not a salvation issue. For me, the important thing is that you and I are sister and brother in Christ. That despite our differences on this issue, that we can worship side by side, that we can serve as LEMs together at God's altar. That's what's truly important. Not our positions on various issues." I then went on to tell her that despite the fact that I did not agree with her position, I support her right to that position and to be able to express it. I encouraged her to call the Bishop's office. I encouraged her to write to the National Church headquarters in New York. I encouraged her to do whatever she needed to do to express her opinion and let her voice be heard.

That conversation changed my relationship with Mary. After that, she never again tried to convince me that I was wrong or that I needed to change my position on the issue. We were able to worship together and to serve at the altar as equals, as brother and sister in Christ, without letting other things get in the way. And I firmly believe it was because I affirmed her right to her beliefs, even though I didn't agree with them. And I affirmed her right to be able to express those beliefs and positions in appropriate and productive ways. She felt heard. She felt validated. And so then, at least in dealing with me, she could focus on our living into the unity of purpose of loving God and loving others through our ministries at St. Francis. We were able to focus not on what divided us, but to focus on that which united us. Our love of God, our love of Jesus, our desire to be faithful and to serve the Church.

We are human. We are not always going to agree. But if we remain focused on what is truly important: our relationship with God, our relationship with Christ, our relationship with one another, and our common purpose to faithfully live the Gospel as best we can, then we can begin to live into the unity, and experience something of the love, that Jesus wishes for us in his High Priestly Prayer.